

Day of Atonement

CHICAGO SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA
at Orchestra Hall
March 13, 1986

By Kyle Gann

Driving along one day a year or so ago, I flipped on a classical radio station. A string quartet was playing. "Ah, Mozart," I said; "late Mozart." I listened for a few minutes and changed my mind. "Bartok." A few more minutes and I switched again. "Very late Mozart." This was weird. Not being able to tell whether a piece is by Mozart or Bartok is like not knowing whether the actor in a certain movie is Alan Alda or Hulk Hogan.

The composer, it turned out, was George Rochberg. Rochberg has had an odd and confusing career. In the 50s and early 60s he was one of the very few really good 12-tone composers America had ever produced. His *Sonata-Fantasia*, the *Serenata d'estate*, the *Second Symphony*, all breathed an air of passion and urgent exploration at a time when almost all other serial music in America seemed sterile, hermetic, and number-conscious (little has changed since). Then, in 1963, Rochberg made a daring and unprecedented move: he apostatized from the academically sacrosanct 12-tone movement. He began lecturing his fellow composers on the irrelevance and moribundity of the dry, theory-laden music they were writing. A 1972 Rochberg article stated: "Someone once wrote: 'The avant-garde is the last refuge of the untalented.' To which I add: Amen. There is no use deluding ourselves any

longer. Music which cannot be remembered, gives no gratification to the performers and no vital experience to the listener, is not worthy of deep or serious consideration." Colleagues grumbled that Rochberg had sold out. Academia would refuse to tolerate any younger composer who voiced such unreasonable views. As chairman of the composition department at the University of Pennsylvania, though, Rochberg kept his job.

Rochberg's solution to the problem, however, seemed more problematic than the problem itself. His idea of a return to tonality was not to re-create tonality on a new basis, like Ashley, Budd, Reich, and many other Cage-influenced composers, but to use styles of music created by great composers of the past. Thus his *Music for the Magic Theater* was a collage piece, incorporating quotations from Mozart, Mahler, and others. (Earlier quotations of Schönberg in the serial works had been less noticeable.) Then, in the "Concord" quartets, he began actually writing "in the style of" Handel, Beethoven, Mahler, Bartok, etc. Certainly this was memorable and accessible music. But why listen to music that reminds you of Mahler, when you could just listen to Mahler? The wholesale adoption of a style created by another composer is a task not easily accomplished with any feel of authenticity, nor is it clear why someone would want to attempt it in the first place. It seemed a creative cul-de-sac, an especially sad one considering the music Rochberg had already written.

Perhaps Rochberg agreed. For his *Fifth Symphony*, the piece commissioned by Georg Solti and premiered last week by the Chicago

Symphony, made little discernible reference to the music of any earlier composers; it was pure Rochberg. If it were reminiscent of anything, it would have to be of Rochberg's 1956, 12-tone *Second Symphony* (his only symphony available on record), with which it shares the same clarity of ideas, complexity of form, and versatility of mood. Rochberg claims that he realized in 1963 that "at root I am a complete romantic," and while this *Fifth Symphony* was romantic through and through, the romanticism of the *Second Symphony* did not really lie very far below the surface. Differences in technique notwithstanding, those two symphonies share so many traits that, were one unaware of the intervening works, it would be easy to interpret them as logical points in a slow, linearly continuous development. Rochberg seems to have come home.

Most nontonal music of the angry/romantic vein tends to fall into a kind of free-floating anxiety, expressive of emotions that are usually ambiguous, undifferentiated, and ultimately monochromatic. One of the main virtues of Rochberg's music, much in evidence in this new work, is the discreet precision with which he characterizes the mood of each section, the extreme degree of emotional focus within a basically atonal language. The *Fifth Symphony* began with a hysterically violent outburst, an urgent, alternating-half-step motive in the strings underlined by crescendoing brass lines. From here the music gradually melted into a beautifully serene, almost-tonal passage of soft, echoing horn calls, a really stunning effect. Few composers in this style could have effected that transition so gracefully, much less spent the rest of

the symphony exploring the emotional realm between those extremes. The other preeminent Rochbergian virtue is the clear audibility of his musical ideas. The horn call motive tended to intrude softly in more anguished surroundings, while most of the periodic outbursts of violence made use of a rising quintuplet motive (shades of the *Second Symphony*!). The combined result of these virtues was that, while the *Fifth Symphony* ranged far and wide in mood and intensity, striking out in unpredictable directions and continually turning back on itself to reexamine earlier ideas, the materials provided safe moorings amid the complexity, and one felt secure even upon a

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first listening with what was actually happening in the music. A soaring horn line toward the end seemed to lapse into some melodramatic posturing, but it little marred a generally favorable impression. Certainly Rochberg's *Fifth* invites further hearings, and I suspect that its attractiveness will prove quite enduring.

The CSO's performance, if slightly rhythmically ragged around the edges, was nevertheless passionate, committed, and quite convincing. As with Lutoslawski's *Third Symphony* two and a half years ago, Solti showed quite impressively the kind of intensity and

large-scale shaping he is capable of bringing to a contemporary work he respects. He also showed, in both these cases, his astuteness in selecting a composer to commission, and it was particularly gratifying in this instance that his choice was an American. Let's hope that he and his orchestra show the sort of generosity to the Rochberg *Fifth*, in terms of repeat performances, that they have to the Lutoslawski *Third*.

The earlier works that surrounded the symphony did not share its Promethean variety of color and expression, but they were performed in an equally exciting manner. Solti's reading of Weber's *Euryanthe* overture was grandly operatic in its dimensions. As if to assure that this slight work could hold its own on such a program, he resorted to extreme contrasts in its pacing, interspersing passages of furious rhythmic energy with delicate adagios that dropped almost to a standstill. The same air of taut rhythmic excitement, together with a feeling of genuine nobility, applied throughout to that least appreciated of Schumann's symphonies, the *Second*. The cleanness of the orchestral sound, and the remarkably crisp freshness of the string playing especially in the rushing *Scherzo*, were enough to make one wonder how the word "muddy" came to be associated with Schumann's orchestration. Set in these classically Beethovenesque proportions, the piece was circumscribed only by its own inherent limitations, and an unbiased listener could hardly help but notice that it sounded a little pale and flat next to the Rochberg symphony. Which is not necessarily, of course, to say that it is an inferior work.

He added cryptically.

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